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ABSTRACT

A story told about soliciting comments and criticisms from students during a class one day reveals a number of disturbing techniques used in academic story-telling. Such story telling, which has become increasingly common in academic teaching/writing journals of late, creates the deceptive impression of sincerity and intimacy. In this case, the instructor himself discovers calculated maneuvers in his own story telling, which underscores how inherent they are to the genre. For example, the narrator in this story, by adopting an easy-going tone admitting to fallible traits like planning classes at the last moment, immediately establishes a rhetoric of disclosure, an ethos of sincerity that hopes to have the effect of relaxing the reader's guard. It should be noted further that the narrative contains no quotations; all student responses are filtered through the narrator. This limited perspective can only be acceptable if a person is naive enough to trust the narrator entirely--a strategy that all students have been taught since high school to relinquish. Also, the narrative bunches students into two groups--those who resist the teacher and those who do not. Finally, the narrative exhibits a profound lack of narrative detail. Stories of the classroom couched in a "personal voice" may be accessible, but to the voice more than to the classroom. (TB)

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"Personal Voice in Stories of Teaching"

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I'm going to begin with a story.

I had a class a few weeks ago that has stayed with me ever since. It was mid-semester, and I decided that the students in my course entitled "Introduction to Critical Reading" might want to reflect with me for a half-hour or so on what had been useful and/or troublesome about the course thus far. It was one of those spontaneous plans that I expected to be harmless--perhaps even productive--but that led in the end to a full class period (in this case, an hour and fifteen minutes) of criticisms, accusations, defensive reactions, and hostility. What had seemed a smooth-running course with very little resistance from these mostly sophomore-level English majors suddenly revealed itself as the locus of considerable frustration and confusion.

Not that I had been completely blind to student woes. A few students had already openly expressed dismay that I seemed to expect so much from their writing--even from brief in-class writings that other teachers might tend to evaluate more casually. Indeed, I had made a conscious decision before the term began that in this course I would attempt to confront seriously the problem of English majors graduating without ever being challenged as writers. I wasn't sure the degree to which our literature program, not to mention our composition program, was guilty of sliding students along despite poor writing; but I was determined to do whatever work it would take to prevent such a thing from

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happening in this course. Students would write often, and they would be expected to write well, even at the level (or perhaps I should say *especially* at the level) of the sentence--that site where the most difficult lessons in writing can occur. Of course, this is also the site where teachers themselves find it most difficult to provide useful instruction--it's always easier to respond to the larger structure of an essay than to its phrasing--and I was expending no small amount of effort trying to help students attend to syntax without rewriting their sentences for them.

In any case, what the class a few weeks ago uncovered was the extent to which most of the students had been hiding their anger over my response to their writing. What was I attempting to do? make them feel worthless? show them that they had no business in an English department? crush their egos with my exacting demands? While a few of the students spoke up in defense of my methods, asserting that it was about time someone finally established higher expectations for their achievement, most of them seemed profoundly disconcerted by feelings of inadequacy and perplexity over how to improve their writing on such short notice. If teachers in their other classes were willing to accept their essays without complaint, why was I being such a stick-in-the-mud, especially with an introductory course?

That class really shook me up in the days that followed; it made me reconsider my assumptions about challenging students to write with a more critical eye. "Challenging"--a word that sounds so benevolent in the abstract but that can cause such resentment in practice. The potential for misunderstanding, for students interpreting criticism meant to challenge as criticism meant to destroy, has led me to be more careful over the past few weeks. I've been meeting more frequently with students on an individual basis in order to help them see the possibilities for, not just the problems with, their prose. And we've

been talking more in class about standards for writing--not only about the standards they encounter as students, but the standards they imagine themselves setting for their own students once they become teachers. Things are getting better. Students often stay after class to discuss ideas for their revisions, and I've learned something about the ways assistance can be perceived as persecution. Next term I'll know from the start.

So that's my story. It's a story of teaching that uses what can be called a "personal" voice rather than an academic voice: it's colloquial, chatty, unself-conscious. As a text, it's easy to read, immediately accessible--the kind of text that sometimes finds its way into pedagogical publications. And why not? There's that teacher in all of us who wants to push aside the sophisticated jargon and simply *talk* about what's happening in the classroom. And there's a reader in all of us--perhaps a little of Maxine Hairston in all of us-- who, after so many pages of "discursive" this and "hegemonic" that, wants to read a plain-spoken story about teachers and students. Confession has long been an appealing narrative mode, and it should come as little surprise that it would figure in the work of those attempting to reinvigorate the academic essay.

But what I want to bring to our attention here are the rather devious subtleties of this seemingly well-intentioned genre--particularly as it has been appropriated by teachers and scholars of composition. I'd like my own narrative to serve as an example, for although it is somewhat brief when compared to certain stories of the classroom published in the past few years (I'm thinking especially of those in *College English*), it nevertheless contains what I consider to be the basic elements of such stories. Note, for instance, that the narrator of my story--and I'm going to refer to him in the third person, as a narrative construct--the narrator begins by casually relating that he recently had a class

that went awry. This apparently off-hand opening gesture might in fact be read as a rather clever way to produce that essential feature of the middle-class narrative--readerly identification. By adopting an easy-going tone with which he admits to fallible traits like planning classes at the last moment, the narrator immediately establishes a rhetoric of disclosure, an ethos of sincerity that hopes to have the effect of relaxing the reader's guard. You might recall Jane Tompkins confessing that she happened upon her pedagogical conversion because she "was tired," not because she meant to do something altruistic. Such a modest self-portrayal helps to create what Nancy K. Miller calls autobiography's "truth effect"--its desire to be read as the *real* story, to give readers an authentic presence on whom they can rely for epistemological security.

My concern, then, is with the textual features of "personal voice" narratives. How is it that they convince, and what is it they convince us of? Returning to my own narrative, we might look more closely at how it represents the classroom. First, it is worth noting that this story contains no quotations; we are told that students spoke, but we don't know exactly what they said, only how the narrator mediates and interprets their contributions. Again, this can only be acceptable if we are naive enough to trust the narrator entirely--a strategy for reading that most of us have been taught since high school, if not eariler, to relinquish. Second, students are bunched into only two groups--those who resist the teacher and those who don't. Is this a reliable account of student differences in the narrator's classroom? Unfortunately, the grouping of students into simplistic and predictable units is a common element of the teacher-centered narrative. Finally, a third feature that is part and parcel of the first two: this tale as a whole illustrates a profound lack of descriptive detail, to the extent that one could hardly imagine it making an effective piece of publishable fiction.

It comes to an absurdly tidy conclusion--students now happy, teacher's lesson learned--and there isn't anything approaching a memorable character or an innovative way with words. Which is what I'm usually thinking while reading the latest "personal" essay in an academic journal: Shouldn't this at least sound like a decent piece of fiction?

But it's not a piece of fiction, you may reply; it's a teacher's story of something that really happened. And you no sooner say this than you know you're wrong, for you know that any story, even the stories of teaching we exchange with colleagues in the hall, are "made up," constructed, fictionalized by the very act of narration. My narrative has excluded much more than it includes, and by deciding upon a so-called "personal voice" it tells the story of a course at the University of Pittsburgh as if it were an individual teacher's encounter with a mostly homogenous bunch of students. Now I'm not suggesting that *any* first-person narrative of teaching will necessarily give such a reductive vision of students or of the teacher's relationship to them; but I *am* suggesting that we need to be much more aware than it seems to me we often are about the illusion of truth created by supposedly "intimate" representations of our work as teachers.

Stories of the classroom couched in a "personal voice" may be accessible, but what they give us access to is more the voice than the classroom.